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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at the California State University, San Bernardino, to determine how best to conduct elementary, intermediate, and advanced courses in French via self-paced learning. A questionnaire was given to current students and to alumni who had taken at least one self-paced course in French to assess their opinions on existing methods of instruction. Findings indicated that 94% felt that existing small self-paced classes helped them adapt to college life; 98% expressed surprise that the instructor "cared enough" to be available often; and 61% remarked that before entering a self-paced class they had not realized that learning depended upon them, and that this realization had changed their whole attitude toward their academic life. Although most students do not purposefully choose the self-paced approach and initially have problems directing themselves, its popularity is increasing. Advantages to the instructor include a knowledge that the material has been mastered before a new topic is introduced; for students, the discipline, organization of time, and acceptance of responsibility will carry over to traditional courses. Supporting materials provided include descriptions of materials used in the course, the organization of the class schedule, and a class session. (JB)

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PSI Students' Need For Class Interaction and How to Satisfy this need.

Since this presentation is to be given to a very varied audience, I have organized it somewhat differently from the usual method. The first part of the paper is designed for those who already have an extensive knowledge of self-paced courses. It concnetrates on the academic and psychological beneftis of compulsory class attendance. I have then provided brief summaries of our method of organizing such classes and of theteaching methods used in these sessions. These sheets are available as hand-outs for those who feel they would be beneficial. Lastly, I have explained in detail the organization of our course at California State University, San Bernardino, pointing out the problems as well as the advantages, for students and instructors. The materials presently being used are listed, along with those which are in production or undergoing improvement. The last section is for those who have not had much exposure to the self-paced method. It is oriented towards foreign languages, but the information is applicable to all disciplines.

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Psychological and academic benefits of class interaction in self-paced courses.

In most courses where some type of independent study is involved, whether they be named PSI, Individualized, semi-autonomous or self-paced, the instructor has little contact with the students. In other self-paced courses on this campus (Calfornia State University San Bernardino) instructors meet their students only when they have problems, or possibly at exam times. Frequently they never set eyes on their students. This comment does not mean that the courses are unsound or academically weak: on the contrary, they are some of the most demanding courses on campus. Much time has been spent in creating materials suitable for the course and rendering it completely self-explanatory.

When I took over these courses in French (elementary, intermediate and advanced language courses) it was immediately obvious to me that a foreign language cannot be taught this way, so I developed the method which will be described later, by which every student not only could but must attend a minimum of one class hour per week. At the time I was thinking only of the vital oral/aural elements, but gradually other advantages of the addition of regular class meetings became apparent.

A questionnaire was given to present students and alumni who had taken at least one self-paced course.in French. (Many had taken all three.) What follows is a summary of their opinions.

1. 95% felt that students need to identify with at least one instructor in order to stay in post-secondary education. For many, the elementary French course was their introduction to college

life. They thought that without the intimate atmosphere of the small classes (so small as to be really group meetings) in which they came to know the instructor so well that problems which had nothing to do with French could also be discussed, they might very well have dropped out very early. (This instiution, like most others, provides students with an advisor, but students o not take advantage of this help as they should.)

2. 94% felt that making friends within the university was also a vital part of their motivation to stay with their studies. AT CSUSB most of our classes are small (20-25 students) but even in a class that size some students, and this group included many older returning people, are too shy to dvelop friendships quickly. In our groups, where the average attendance is 4 Or 5, friendships are soon formed. Some answers to the questionnaire mentioned the emphasis on the personal in these classes as having helped them find others with similar interests. The method of conducting a self-paced class is described later on in detail, as are the materials, but it must be mentioned briefly here. The method is question-answer in the target language (based on the chapter being studied). Examples: Have you a brother? a sister? Where do you come from? What do you like to do in the summer? In what are you most interested? Everyone likes to talk about him/her self, and is willing to do so ad infinitum since this is not an accasion to bore others about oneself but a learning situation whereby another language is acquired. Similarly, students learn a lot about eachother by means of the answers. Sometimes a recognition of mutual interests

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develops early: perhaps they have the same hobbies or similar child problems. Sometimes they find that they come from the same area and can develop a car pool. I would venture to say that in no other course (not even psychology or education classes, where I see much discussion in small groups) does information flow as freely or unselfconsciously, because students are thinking not of the effect the details of their personal lives are producing but of their language proficiency in the production of those details.

3. 98% of students expressed surprise that the instructor "cared enough" to be available five days a week, often into the evening hours, for group sessions and testing. Some had had bad experiences with instructors who were never available outside class, sometimes not even in the required office hours. If the instructor of the self-paced course was willing to give all that extra time, they (the students) reacted by giving more of their own time to that course. The instructor is not, of course, being entirely altruistic in keeping such long hours. If attendance in class is compulsory, then an hour must be provided when the student can attend. CSUSB has a very large percentage of working and commuting students. (Some come from 85 miles wway.) So the only way to cut down on the number of in-class or in-office hours would be to refuse students with difficult schedules, but our department needs numbers! (We have no language requirement and Spanish is much more popular in this part of the country.)

4. 61% remarked that before entering a self-paced class they had not realized that learning depends on them. They had thought that it depended on the instructor. The realization changed their whole

attitude towards college life (and perhaps their own personal life) and its importance cannot be overestimated.

Materials Used in the Self-paced Courses

Book: A Vous de Choisir by Drs. Bull, Rydell and Switzer. Rvised edition published May 1985. Text written by the Frenc faculty at CSUSB because no traditional text is suitable. This text can be (and is being) used in traditional classes also, however.

30 tapes, recorded by two native speakers, include the Readings, Oral questions, vocabulary, Multiple choice tests and Dictées.

30 films, made by the French faculty at CSUSB, reinforce the vocabulary and grammatical points of each chapetr. More films, to test critical thinking in French, are in the planning stage.

Translation practice, which is voluntary, may be obtained from teletype programs. Students use this computer programming if they wish; it is not obligatory.

Learning Master cards reinforce vocabulary and pronunciation while providing the visual element so vital to internalization of vocabulary. Cards accompany each chapter.

Fill-inograms, a type of crossword puzzle, assist in memorizing vocabulary and spelling. These are now being revised for the new edition.

Pre-tests, which students take to determine whether they are ready to take the unti test. These are corrected immediately for the necessary swift feedback.

Unit tests, which determine the stddents' ultimate grade. Students may not proceed to the next unit unless they score at least 90% (for beginners) 87% (for intermediates) (Rarely a problem because of the safeguard of the pre-test.)

Organization of class schedule at Cal-State San Bernardino.

I. No schedule is set before registration.

II. At registration, students fill out a form indicating their free hours, including work schedules and other commitments.

III. After registration, forms are separated into 101,102,103. Forms are used to plan the best hours for class meetings and to ensure that each student can attend class twice a week. When there are extreme problems with free hours (as happens with students who work full time and are enrolled in other classes) only one session may be possible, but at least one must be offered whatever the difficulties because attendance is a course requirement.

IV. Students do not sign up for any particular session. They may attend any one they wish, as often as they wish and are able. They may vary their sessions each week.

V. Number of class sessions necessarily offered depends more on the variation of students' free hours than on the number of students. This quarter, for example, there are 89 students enrolled and 17 class sessions offered. There have been quarters with 65 students who needed 21 sessions or 99 who needed 15. A larger number of students therefore does not mean extra hours in class for the instructor.

VI. Care must be used, however, to avoid too large classes. Because students meet less often than in regular language classes, and because they will be studying different modules, a class size of no more than 8 students is desirable: 5 is a good number to give adequate time to each. This problem is solved not by limiting class size (impossible, because students may attend whatever session they wish that particular day or week) but by providing adequate numbers of sessions and allowing the students to discover for themselves the smaller classes. This decision making fits well into the semi-autonomous concept.

VII. Traditional texts are not suitable for a self-paced program. The Faculty at CSUSB have designed their own text : A Vous de Choisir. The second edition of this text was published by U.P.A. in May 1985.

VIII. The course is genuinely and completely self-paced. Students may have another quarter in which to finish the material if they need it. Or, they may complete two, even three, quarters'work in one. They take tests when THEY are ready, not at the instructor's orders or co venience, and NEVER in class hours.

Self-paced French Class sessios: Communication and
COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT.

Sample class: 6 students present.

Instructor: Quelle leçon étudiez-vous?
1 student is studying 3, part a, 1 is on 4, parts a&b, 2 on 5,
(one has studied the whole unit, one only parts a&b)2 on 7.
Instructor: Avez-vous des questions?
One student asks the pronunciation of a word. There are no questions
on the grammatical points or idioms. Our text is self-explanatory.

Instructor proceeds immediately to questions in French, moving
quickly from one student to another. Because of the text arrangement
keeping track of the students' level is simple. Students are first
asked questions from the book which they have prepared.
Instructor is flexible. Slow students are asked fewer questions,
quick ones receive more and longer ones.

Instructor then invents questions which:
1) reflect the grammatical points, idioms and vocabulary of unit.
2) stress the points in which students have shown themselves weak.
3) personalize the questions to the interests of the students
so as to give:
COMMUNICATION and COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT: the KEY to LEARNING!

NOTE: No drills.
No questions to which answers may be lifted straight from the text.

These are 1) boring
2) non-productive
3) valuable time wasted
4) impossible to put into practice in a self-paced class.

Grammar, comprehension, pronunciation, command of vocabulary all tested
by the question-answer method.

Constant review and vocabulary retention obtained :
1) by listening to students on other units
2) by making students ask eachother questions which must use
the material of units which the other is studying.

For those not very familiar with self-paced methods of teaching, the problem of these small classes or group meetings is not immediately perceivable, but, as the description on the previous page explains, after the first week students will be on different lessons because they are proceeding at their own speed. A different teaching method whereby all material could be covered was necessary. Students must come to class having read the text, studied the grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, fully prepared to answer the oral questions. It is then easy for the instructor to cover several chapters, improvise with his own material, and then give the students an opportunity to formulate their own questions to eac other, thereby giving some necessary review of previous material.

Students soon adapt to this type of class, although they do not always see the benefits. Most of them enroll in a self-paced rather than a regular class simply because it fits into their schedule. They have not considered the advantages of competency-based learning, whereby students advance to new material only when they have mastered the old, and so are building always on solid foundations: something of vital importance in a foreign language. Some pace themselves too slowly and stretch out the course far longer than they need. Some are impatient with the required class attendance and attempt to avoid it (that problem was solved by not allowing them to take the chapter test until they had attended class), some never appear at all. These however are the exceptions; on the whole the self-paced course is popular, as evidenced by the triplig of enrollment in the last five years.

The self-paced course as opposed to the traditional appeals

to the self-conscious student who is afraid of making a fool of humself in front of a large class. A small group is very much less threatening than a large group.

There are also advatages to the instructor in a self-paced course. All instructors have known the frustration of a class where the brightest must be held back and the slowest forced on before they are ready, because the instructor must cater to the average student, and must stick to a timetable. This frustration vanishes in a self-paced course. Instruction is truly personalized, even though the students meet in a class session. The instructor has the immense satisfaction of knowing that previous material has been mastered before the new is presented, something which is vital in language learning. Certainly the instructor has to learn to be very flexible in his teaching (no established lesson plans) and he may also have to work longer hours, but the results are well worth the extra work.

The "direct" method of presenting the material must be abandoned, of course; it is completely impractical for such a course. In my opinion this method is not as effective as that of making the students responsible for the material. In a self-paced course students cannot be passive recipients of information; they must be active learners. Many years of teaching have convinced me that students who are passive recipients are often not receiving anything after the first fifteen minutes because their listening span is so short. The preferable way is to have the students "dig out" the material themselves and then present the material before a jury of their peers (albeit a very sympathetic and semi-private one), not before a large class or the instructor alone.

(This aspect will be taken up again later.) The discovery of material and self-application to the comprehension of it also assiks in the retention of the subject matter.

One of the most gratifying aspects of self-paced courses is that the discipline, organization of time and acceptance of responsibilty for learning will carry over to traditional courses. This aspect is of course well-known and has been backed up with statistics by experts in PSI. What is less well-known is the effect of the small class meetings on the students' future performance. AT CSUSB we have noted that students attending selfpaced classes develop a different attitude towards their peers and their class hours. All of a sudden they realize that they are not competing with others for grades (the dreadful situation forced upon them either by the torturing practice of grading on the curve or by their experiences in school from which they carry the label "good student" or poor student." Once they realize that now they are competing only with themselves, they are willing to work woth other studnnts, the fast helping the slow; they are much more relaxed in class, eager to try the language because they see that they are not condemned for making oral errors. Classes are fun, but rewarding fun. Students get to know eachother well in the small groups; the instructor becomes well-acquainted with them and they with the instructor. The nature of the questions in the text enables the instructor (and other students) to know and joke about a "mauvais chien" or "une voiture" which is definitely not "en bonne condition."

When I took over the self-paced program here I tried the one-on-one sessions which my predecessor had used. It was disastrous.

Students came in terrified (even though I am not a terrifying person) unable to relax and produce their best efforts, hating the whole oral process. Besides, there was no opportunity for them to establish true communication by interacting with others in a "real" situation, which is what the classrooom session must produce: questions and answers which produce the information which a student really wants to know. I tried proctors, but found them unsatisfactory. They lacked patience, were too often anxious to show off their own expertise to impress the beginner instead of empathizing with the beginner's problems and diffidence. Perhaps graduate students as proctors work out better; we have no M.A. program so had to use only seniors. I realized that the only solution was the procedure described above. It has succeeded so well in increasing the enrollment in French that now the Administration gives me some Faculty part-time help in conducting the class sessions so that I am not in class quite as many times per week. (See page 1. for ration of classes to number of students.)

In my opinion the self-paced method not only attracts students to French, it retains them, and not only in the French program but in the university itself. Students need to have people with whom they can feel at ease, where they can get to know others well, and in all likelihood arrange to study wuth them.

Self-paced programs need not be organized on the method above described. If instructors want to cling to drills, for example, they can incorporate them into the tapes (they are already on the computer). It is difficult to adapt the traditional text to a self-paced: for

example, all the exercises which say: "Demandez à un autre étudiant de" . . . How can they be used when the five students one is facing in the class are all on different chapters? For instructors who do not wish to abandon to the student the responsibility of reading (pronouncing and understanding) the Presentation part of a text, use may be made of special tapes which the instructor can create . (We chose to test our students through the Multiple Choice questions on the tape, but there are certainly other possibilities; indeed we are at the moment thinking of creating more advanced comprehension exefcises for the intermediate students.) The self-paced is not tied into a traditional mode; that, to me, is one of the most interesting and stimulating aspects of these courses.

One of the chief criticisms raised against the self-paced is that students so not get enough oral practice. In a typical self-paced class of four students one hour long, each student , under the question answer method, gets 15 minutes of oral practice, which is as much as a student in a traditional class of 20-30 students would get in a class meeting three times per week; in all likelihood it is considerably more. When self-paced students attend more than one class per week, or when the number in class is less than four, the oral practice becomes even more intensive. The only time when this criticism might be valid is in a course where no class sessions are offered.